

WEST BRANCH PENNSYLVANIA CANAL

South of Route 664 along north bank of the West  
Branch Susquehanna River, 2,000 feet east of the  
Jay Street Bridge  
Lock Haven Vicinity  
Clinton County  
Pennsylvania

HAER No. PA-188

HAER  
PA  
18-LOKHA  
4-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

National Park Service  
Northeast Region  
Philadelphia Support Office  
U.S. Custom House  
200 Chestnut Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19106

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## HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

WEST BRANCH PENNSYLVANIA CANAL

HAER No. PA-188

**Location:** Located on the south side of Route 664, approximately 2,000 feet east of the Jay Street Bridge, Lower Lockport, Lock Haven Vicinity, Clinton County, Pennsylvania

UTM: 18.295090.4336740  
Quad: Lock Haven, Pennsylvania

**Date of Construction:** 1834; Altered 1873-1874

**Present Owner:** Richard Raible  
322 Hobson Street  
Mill Hall, Pennsylvania 17751

**Present Use:** Vacant.

**Significance:** An important link in the statewide transportation network of the nineteenth century, the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal did much to economically develop the valley of the West Branch of the Susquehanna River from 1834 to 1889 by linking the valley with larger markets to the east. Together with other canal lines in the area, the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal was also responsible for the creation of Lock Haven--and neighboring Lockport to a lesser extent--as a center for transporting, processing, and distributing agricultural products, iron and coal, and lumber.

**Project Information:** Documentation was undertaken in October and November 1991 in accordance with a Memorandum of Agreement between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Baltimore District, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, and the Lock Haven Area Flood Protection Authority. The documentation serves as a mitigative measure for the treatment of historic properties that were identified and evaluated in a series of studies and that would be affected by the proposed Lock Haven flood protection project. The protection project calls for a series of flood-walls and levees to be constructed around Lock Haven, Pennsylvania. When these features are in place, the resource addressed in this report will be located in an area of induced flooding. The resource will not be demolished or moved but will remain as is in its existing location. Documentation was prepared for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Baltimore District, by the Historic Preservation Group of Kise Franks & Straw, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: M. Todd Cleveland, project manager; Susan C. Nabors, historian; Martin B. Abbot, historian; and Jill Cremer, graphics. Robert Tucher provided the documentary photographs. Steve Humphrey and Lance Metz of Hugh Moore Historical Park and Museums, Easton, Pennsylvania,

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conducted much of the research and writing for the preparation of this  
HAER report.

## I. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The West Branch Pennsylvania Canal was constructed between 1828 and 1837 as part of the Pennsylvania Canal System.<sup>1</sup> The primary purpose of the Pennsylvania Canal System was the construction of a transportation link between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, but in order to win legislature support for this project, supporters of the Philadelphia to Pittsburgh line, or "Main Line" Canal, were forced to endorse the construction of lateral canals in the Susquehanna Valley.<sup>2</sup> One of the most important of these lateral canals was the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal, which was conceived of as a means of linking the growing communities of the Susquehanna River's West Branch valley (north central Pennsylvania) with the more populous eastern parts of the state. It was also viewed as a possible alternate route to the Ohio Valley if a connection from it to the Allegheny River could be engineered and built.<sup>3</sup>

Construction of the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal began in 1827. When completed, the waterway was seventy-three miles in length. Its eastern terminus was Northumberland, where it joined with the Susquehanna Division Canal. Little work was done on the West Branch until 1831, when J. D. Harris was appointed as its principal engineer. He was assisted by Robert Faries and William D. Foster. The superintendent of the canal's construction force was William P. Packer, a Williamsport newspaper editor and future governor of Pennsylvania.<sup>4</sup> The construction of the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal was divided into two sections: the "Muncy Line", which was composed of the first twenty-four miles north and west of Northumberland, and the combined Upper and Lower "Lycoming Lines", which would eventually extend to Lock Haven.<sup>5</sup> As originally designed, the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal would utilize nineteen locks to overcome 138-1/2 feet in elevation difference between its terminal points, while each lock itself would be ninety feet in length and seventeen feet in width.<sup>6</sup> A more detailed description of the locks of the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal is contained in the following contract for the construction of a lock on the Lycoming Line.

The chambers of the locks are to be 90 feet from quoin to quoin by 17 feet in width, the bottom to be laid with foot timbers 2 feet from centre to centre -- on the bottom timbers is to be laid a course of two inch plank throughout their length upon the side walls are to be started and immediately in front of side walls are to be fastened sills extending from the lower hollow quoin to the head of the lock . . . The mason work to be laid dry with large-size stone, the tail of the lock from the lower hollow quoin to be laid in courses of hammer dressed stone.<sup>7</sup>

Contracts for the construction of the Lycoming Line of the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal from Muncy Dam to Bald Eagle Creek were let on July 1 and August 24, 1831.<sup>8</sup> Funding shortages delayed construction of the Lycoming Line until January of 1833, when the Pennsylvania Canal Commissioners ordered that the engineer of the Upper Division of the Lycoming Line should make a survey and an estimate of the expense of connecting the Lycoming Line with the Bald Eagle Creek at its mouth, as well as at a point above Great Island.<sup>9</sup> In response to this order, James D. Harris made the required surveys and estimates, and by April, he submitted his report to Canal Commissioners John Mitchell and Josiah White, who were inspecting the valley of the West Branch of the Susquehanna River.<sup>10</sup>

The need for the construction of a connection between the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal and the Bald Eagle Creek was brought about by the formation of the Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Navigation Company, which was authorized by the Pennsylvania legislature to construct a

canal from Bellefonte in Centre County to the West Branch of the Susquehanna River.<sup>11</sup> To finance this waterway, the Pennsylvania legislature guaranteed the 5% annual interest on the company's stock issue, which was not to exceed \$200,000.

The Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Navigation generally followed the routes of Spring and Bald Eagle Creeks. Beginning in Bellefonte, the navigation system followed Spring Creek until it merged with the large Bald Eagle Creek at Milesburg. As designed by engineer M. R. Stealey, the Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Navigation was built in two sections that joined at Howard Furnace. The Lower Division, which stretched for 12-1/2 miles from Howard Furnace to Lock Haven, was completed in 1837, while the Upper Division, which stretched for 12-1/2 miles from Howard Furnace to Bellefonte, was not opened until 1848.<sup>12</sup> The Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Navigation soon developed into a major transportation route for pig iron and bituminous coal.

As designed by James Harris, the connection between the Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Navigation and the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal took the form of a cross-cut canal. From Williamsport to a point opposite the community of Lock Haven, the Lycoming Line of the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal ascended the east bank of the West Branch of the Susquehanna. At what was the infant village of Lockport (now Lower Lockport), opposite Lock Haven, Lock No. 34 was built to allow canal boats to enter a slack water pool that was formed behind the Bald Eagle Dam across the West Branch of the Susquehanna River. The boats then crossed to the west shore by means of a cable ferry to enter Lock No. 35 (see HAER No. PA-187) at the Bald Eagle Cross-Cut Canal.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that the primary purpose of Bald Eagle Dam was to supply water for the Lycoming Line of the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal.

With the completion of the Upper Division of the Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Navigation in 1837, a considerable volume of iron and bituminous coal began to pass through the Bald Eagle Cross-Cut and enter the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal. The West Branch itself became a prosperous waterway. By 1847, over 572 boats utilized the port of Lock Haven, which developed an extensive commercial district along the present Water Street to serve this waterborne traffic.<sup>14</sup>

Because the entire Pennsylvania state-built canal system produced insufficient revenue to cover operating expenses, repair costs, and the interest on the bonds that had been issued to pay for the canal construction, in 1857 Pennsylvania decided to dispose of its state-built canal system. The Pennsylvania Main Line Canal was sold to the Pennsylvania Railroad, and the other parts of the system were transferred to the Sunbury and Erie Railroad. This transaction was designed to aid the Sunbury and Erie Railroad in its struggle to complete its line. The Sunbury and Erie Railroad sold the Bald Eagle Cross Cut, West Branch, and Susquehanna Division canals to the newly-formed West Branch and Susquehanna Canal Company.<sup>15</sup>

While the Bald Eagle Cross-Cut, West Branch, and Susquehanna Division canals remained viable operations under the management of the new company, the Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Navigation System began to suffer competition from railroads which were built during the 1850s along its route. The final blow came in 1865 when a serious flood almost completely destroyed this waterway and it was abandoned.<sup>16</sup>

Railroad competition also affected the canals at Lock Haven. The arrival of the Philadelphia and Erie Railroad, the successor to the Sunbury and Erie Railroad, at Lock Haven in 1859 began a

process by which the business district of the community was relocated from Water Street inland to the railroad's line along the present Main and Church Streets.<sup>17</sup>

In 1867, the Bald Eagle Cross-Cut, West Branch, and Susquehanna Division canals were sold to the Pennsylvania Railroad, which organized the Pennsylvania Canal Company to manage these waterways and its other canal properties.<sup>18</sup> Believing that the canals of the Susquehanna River Valley could effectively serve as transportation systems for bulk commodities such as coal, iron and stone, the Pennsylvania Canal Company upgraded its waterways by widening and deepening them as well as doubling the length of their locks.<sup>19</sup> These improvements were undertaken during 1873-1874, resulting in the passage of canal boats which could carry up to 260 tons of cargo if joined together in pairs. Many of these upgraded boats were built during the next five years. Lock No. 34 of the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal is a good surviving example of one of the enlarged Pennsylvania Canal Company lift locks. Despite the improvements of the Pennsylvania Canal Company, traffic did not increase on the Bald Eagle Cross-Cut, West Branch, and Susquehanna Division canals. In 1864, some 1,077,930 tons of cargo passed through these waterways, but in 1878 the annual total had fallen to 668,707 tons.<sup>20</sup>

In 1889, the Bald Eagle Cross-Cut and Lycoming Line of the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal were severely damaged by a flood and were abandoned by the Pennsylvania Canal Company. All navigation ceased west of Loyalsock. On November 5, 1889, a portion of the Bald Eagle Cross-Cut was sold to the Philadelphia and Erie Railroad for \$75,000.<sup>21</sup> In 1930, the Pennsylvania Railroad conveyed the property now containing Lock No. 34 to David and Ruth Laubscher for \$1,600.<sup>22</sup> Ruth Laubscher conveyed the property to Robert Raible, the present owner, in 1975.

## II. SIGNIFICANCE

As an important element of Pennsylvania's nineteenth-century transportation network, the West Branch Pennsylvania Canal did much to economically develop the valley of the West Branch of the Susquehanna River from 1834 to 1889. The system linked the valley with the more populated markets of Eastern Pennsylvania, including Philadelphia with its established trading ties to New York and Baltimore. The man-made water features of the region, consisting of canals, locks, and dams, together with the natural waterway formed by the Susquehanna River's West Branch, were responsible for the creation of Lock Haven (and neighboring Lockport to a lesser extent) as a commercial center. These waterways became the principal routes of commerce in the West Branch valley, and Lock Haven's position at the junction of two canal lines and at the banks of a major river made it a prime trading center for the transport, processing, and distribution of agricultural products, iron and coal, and lumber. Lockport's proximity to the same waterways and to the developing community of Lock Haven across the river led to overall growth and increased prosperity in that village. Prior to the devastating flood of 1889, the fortunes of the Lock Haven area were almost entirely tied to the logging and lumber-processing industries. Without the river to transport the raw logs and the canals to deliver the finished lumber, the area's prosperity would certainly have never reached the levels it did. The healthy economic climate generated by waterway commerce had a ripple effect on the Lock Haven area as new jobs were created, new residences and commercial structures were constructed, and government and social organizations established themselves in the growing commercial hub of Clinton County.

### III. SOURCES

A. Architectural Drawings:

Regional Site Map (Pennsylvania canal systems). Taken from Shank, William H., P.E. *The Amazing Pennsylvania Canals*. York, Pennsylvania: American Canal and Transportation Center, 1981. ~~Layout by Jill Cremer, Kise Franks & Straw, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1992.~~

B. Historic Views: None

C. Interviews:

Laubach, Vivian. October 1991. Interview by Susan C. Nabors, Lower Lockport, Woodward Township, Clinton County, Pennsylvania.

D. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Cassel, Clara M. "The West Branch Division of the Pennsylvania Canal." Master's thesis, Bucknell University, 1933.

Cummings, Hubertis M. "State Owned Canals in Pennsylvania." Manuscript, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Microfilm, Hugh Moore Historical Park and Museums, Easton, Pennsylvania, n.d.

Dashiell, David A., Richard Meyer, and Michael Parrington. "Cultural Resources Survey, Lock Haven and Lockport, Clinton County, Pennsylvania." Report prepared for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Baltimore District, by John Milner Associates in association with Rogers Golden and Halpern, 1985.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Coleman, Ernest. "Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Navigation." *Canal Currents* 19 (Winter 1972): 5-7.

Hannegan, Susan B., and Jean Simmons May. *Clinton County: A Journey Through Time*. Lock Haven, Pennsylvania: Clinton County Sesquicentennial, Inc., 1989.

Petrillo, Charles. "The Pennsylvania Canal Company (1857-1926): The New Main Line Canal Nanticoke to Columbia." *Canal History and Technology Proceedings* 6 (1987): 83-89.

Shank, William H. "Pennsylvania Canal Company 1857-1926." *Canal Currents* 73 (Winter 1986): 3-4.

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American Canal and Transportation Center, 1981.

#### IV. NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>William H. Shank, *The Amazing Pennsylvania Canals* (York, Pa.: American Canal and Transportation Center, 1981), 52.
- <sup>2</sup>Clara M. Cassel, "The West Branch Division of the Pennsylvania Canal (unpublished M.A. Thesis, Bucknell University, 1933), 50-51.
- <sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup>Hubertis M. Cummings, "State Owned Canals in Pennsylvania" (unpublished, undated manuscript on deposit at the archives of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission at Harrisburg, Pa., microfilm copy consulted at archives of Hugh Moore Historical Park and Museums, Inc., Easton, Pa.), 12.
- <sup>5</sup>Cassel, "The West Branch Division of the Pennsylvania Canal," 50.
- <sup>6</sup>Shank, *The Amazing Pennsylvania Canals*, 52.
- <sup>7</sup>Cassel, "The West Branch Division of the Pennsylvania Canal," 59.
- <sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.
- <sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.
- <sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup>Dr. Ernest Coleman, "Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Navigation," *Canal Currents*, Vol. 19, (Winter, 1972), 5-7. See also David A. Dashiell, Richard Meyer, and Michael Parrington, "Cultural Resources Survey, Lock Haven and Lockport, Clinton County, Pennsylvania," prepared for Baltimore District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers by John Milner Associates in association with Rogers Golden and Halpern, 1985, 36-38.
- <sup>12</sup>Coleman, "Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Navigation," 5-7. See also Dashiell, Meyer and Parrington, "Cultural Resources Survey, Lock Haven and Lockport, Clinton County, Pennsylvania," 36, 47.
- <sup>13</sup>Dashiell, Meyer, and Parrington, "Cultural Resources Survey, Lock Haven and Lockport, Clinton County, Pennsylvania," 39-46.
- <sup>14</sup>Hubertis M. Cummings, "State owned Canals in Pennsylvania, West Branch Canal Section," 24.
- <sup>15</sup>William H. Shank, "Pennsylvania Canal Company 1857-1926," *Canal Currents*, Vol. 73 (Winter, 1986), 3-4. See also, Charles Petrillo, "The Pennsylvania Canal Company (1857-1926): The New Main Line Canal Nanticoke to Columbia," *Canal History and Technology Proceedings*, Vol. VI, 1987, 83-89.
- <sup>16</sup>Coleman, "Bald Eagle and Spring Creek Navigation," 6-7.
- <sup>17</sup>Susan B. Hannegan, Jean Simmons May, *Clinton County: A Journey Through Time* (Lock Haven, Pa.: Clinton County Sesquicentennial, Inc., 1989), 69.
- <sup>18</sup>Shank, "Pennsylvania Canal Company," 4.
- <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup>*Ibid.* See also, Cummings, "State Owned Canals in Pennsylvania, West Branch Section," 24-26.
- <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup>Vivian Laubach. Interview by Susan C. Nabors, October, 1991, Lock Haven, Pennsylvania.